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# Introduction

## Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus: A Translocal Perspective

*Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder*

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### Translocality — a cross-cutting research perspective

Translocality, as Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013) in their overview of the employment of the concept in the humanities have rightly pointed out, has come into vogue. Since Appadurai (1996) introduced the term in *Modernity at Large*, translocality has been widely used to depict the social and cultural representations of a globalizing world, which is shaped through the movement of people, goods, and ideas across borders. As an attempt to overcome methodological nationalism and to scrutinize the idea of culture as a closed entity, translocality has been used as a synonym for ‘post-nationalism’ and the ‘deterritorialization’ of social life. However, since then, the term has become a catchphrase in many disciplines such as geography, area studies, history, anthropology, and development studies and is used in various ways as a conceptual or descriptive tool to tackle the multiple social realities of mobility, migration, spatial connectedness, and cultural exchange across national borders. Although critical voices justifiably warn that

an inflationary and often unreflective use of translocality exposes the danger of turning 'trans-terminology' into 'empty signifiers' or 'catch-all phrases completely lacking any theoretical or analytical depth' (Bromber 2013:64), many studies have explored the potential of the concept to introduce new perspectives and epistemological parameters to established research traditions.

While, in migration studies, the term is often simply used as a synonym for transnationalism and thus promotes an understanding of 'trans-' processes merely as crossing nation state borders, human geographers use the term as a lens to trace how processes of migration and mobility feed into the formation of mobile, or translocal, subjectivities (Conradson and McKay 2007). Importantly, the concept emphasizes that such subjectivities emerge out of mobile actors' simultaneous situatedness both 'here' and 'there', which eventually leads to multiple belongings and different, yet changing notions of 'home' (Taylor 2013, Brickell 2011). Shifting from mobility and mobile subjectivity to practices and processes of emplacement, or placemaking, other studies have argued for a conceptualization of translocality that goes beyond merely geographical notions to include discussions about the social constructedness of place and space. Following Massey's idea of place as a setting for interaction (1993, 2006), in urban studies, for example, translocalities have been understood as places in which mobile subjects are locally grounded and where transnational ties are regulated and institutionalized. As such, urbanities are seen as significant 'stops' along people's many and diverse cross-border relations (Sinatti 2009:62–63).

Simultaneously, the translocality concept has influenced the methodological debate about mobile ethnography. Pointing to the importance of place-to-place relations, Hannerz (2013) develops an argument for a 'translocal' rather than 'multi-sited ethnography', because for him it is the conjunctions, interconnections, associations and juxtapositions among sites and places that matter most. Such an understanding of translocality has paved the way for an agency-oriented approach towards phenomena of mobility and connectedness, which helps to explore how mobile and immobile actors engage in translocal social fields, which are characterized by uneven power relations. Translocality thereby allows us to highlight the social experiences of mobile and immobile actors who negotiate and struggle over positions

through the transformation of various forms of capital that are valued differently across different scales (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013:375), a phenomenon that has also been discussed as 'transnational habitus' (Kelly and Luis 2006).

The list of how translocality is used and conceptualized to explain cross-border mobility and other types of connectedness between places could go on. Most striking, however, is that many of these conceptualizations are discussed within the boundaries of academic disciplines instead of stimulating dialogue across them. Accordingly, most of the studies referred to so far exclusively address economic, political, or cultural processes; they discuss translocality as a matter related only to processes of twenty-first century globalization. In contrast, the groundbreaking volume *Translocality: An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies* by Freitag and von Oppen (2010) draws on sustained conversations between historians, anthropologists, linguists and area studies specialists to advocate an understanding of translocality as a cross-cutting field for researching spatial relationships from a 'Southern perspective'. With its focus on non-elitist mobile actors and the attempt to ground their movements and connections across borders in multi-scalar figurations of socio-historical entanglements in and beyond Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, their volume challenges the dominant Eurocentric historical narrative about post-/colonial modernity as a linear and monocentric process. Contributing a notion of 'alternate globalities' that predates twenty-first century globalization, the work of Freitag and von Oppen allows us to explore alternative epistemological avenues towards a new social history 'from below'. Following the idea of translocality as a cross-cutting perspective, the present volume assembles anthropological, historiographical, and sociological case studies as well as studies drawing from human geography and urban studies. Arranging them around the four main topics 'crossing boundaries', 'travelling ideas', 'economic and social movements' and finally 'pious endeavours', the volume aims to bring different disciplinary approaches into conversation with each other. The case studies employ translocality as a descriptive tool to capture practices of mobility and movement, exchange and transfer across Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eurasia, China, and the Middle East, as they have been shaped under the conditions of Soviet colonialism,

post-Soviet transformations, global capitalism and cultural globalization in the region. Furthermore, the authors make use of translocality as an analytical perspective to discuss their empirical data in light of historical and ongoing processes of local and global transformation that connect concrete localities shaped by complex historical configurations, and by a wide range of social-spatial relations that non-elite actors engage in. Linking translocality with a wide range of current themes in academic writing on Central Asia and the Caucasus such as identity, ethnicity, Islam, the state, and the informal economy, this volume seeks to understand the dynamic, often competing, meanings and lived realities of these concepts beyond the epistemological normativity of spatial containers such as nation-state or area. Moreover, this volume approaches locality as a relational concept rather than a geographic or territorially bounded unit. From that angle, the contributions examine how localities are constructed and produced by social as well as spatial practices and relations; thereby addressing aspects of temporality, virtuality, materiality, and emotionality.

Although the empirical case studies assembled here speak to each other in very different ways, some more explicitly than others, this introduction highlights those findings that most strikingly reveal the benefits of a translocal perspective for studying movements, transfers, and exchanges beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus. We continue to elaborate on this in the following paragraphs, beginning with the suggestion that understanding *translocality as lived experience* can help to explore both the existential dimension of spatial movement and the uneven ways that processes of globalization are grounded in and beyond the regions under study here. With *alternative spatialisations* we critically address the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and regionalism and instead argue for alternative readings of socio-spatial configurations *beyond* Central Asia and the Caucasus. With *translocal livelihoods* we further elaborate a concept we have introduced elsewhere, and that draws on material and immaterial aspects that facilitate the processes of institutionalizing mobility (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014).

Furthermore, we invite the reader to follow the socio-spatial relations of student travellers, mobile traders, and businesspeople from Tajikistan to the Arab Emirates and Kyrgyzstan to China in order to address the epistemic limitations that arise when the lives of people from Central

Asia or the Caucasus are perceived only within a framework of post-Socialism or Soviet colonialism. Elaborating the term *transtemporalities*, we then argue that translocality as both a condition and a lived reality is always bound to both space *and* time. This volume's focus is merely on mobility in the Soviet and post-Soviet era, and that of post-Cold-War globalization. However, we are fully aware that many of the socio-spatial relations discussed herein built upon travel trajectories and spatial relations that date back to early or pre-Soviet time, and that have formed spaces of interaction and exchange across and beyond the borders of what we nowadays refer to as 'Central Asia' and 'the Caucasus' (see Nathan Light's foreword to this volume). Finally, many contributions in this book point to the *ambivalences around state borders and state policies* by tracing how transgressions of national borders and other boundaries are accompanied by processes of *translation*, during which the practitioners of translation undergo change, as do the particular localities where such translation occurs. With these clusters of themes, this volume expands the growing body of works dealing with the politics and lived realities of mobility, connectedness, and exchange in and beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus (Mostowlansky 2017, Marsden 2016, Alff and Benz 2014, Darieva 2013, among others).

## Translocality as lived experience

Each of the contributions in this volume tackles translocality as a social reality, thereby illustrating different ways in which translocal practices and experiences are tied to physical or imagined localities. These grounded social realities include, for example, spiritual encounters in a Tablighi Jamaat mosque in Bishkek, informal trade practices in Georgia's borderlands, economic and cultural exchanges across the Kazakh-Chinese border, and the production of a 'new Kyrgyz history' from the desk of a private home in Kyrgyzstan. This confirms our previous observations that translocal contexts emerge from the practices and relations that mobile as well as non-mobile subjects engage in, as part of which they absorb, (re-)interpret and pass on new social, cultural, political, and religious contexts through time and space (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014). Accordingly, Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich in Chapter Two of this volume address the social networks of Tajik

migrants in the Arab Emirates in order to show how translocality as a social reality is institutionalized, while Alff depicts in Chapter Five how circulating notions of Chinese modernity as a model of development is translated into local contexts in Kazakhstan.

In migration and mobility studies related to Central Asia and beyond, the movements of people and ideas are usually among the core topics of interest. To complement this research agenda, some contributions in the present volume explicitly consider the handling of material objects, which we here understand in a wider material and metaphorical sense (see Appadurai 1988). This includes the daily relevance of smartphones as devices to store and trigger spatial religious experiences; sacred genealogies within the wider Central Asian region, which have been preserved and transmitted orally or in writing, and nowadays are recreated and presented via the internet; printed texts on the management of water distribution systems that 'travel' from 'the West' to rural Uzbekistan; or the production and consumption of literature that contributes to new methods of Kyrgyz history-making extending as far as the United States. Beginning from such an examination of the 'social life of things' (Appadurai 1988), some chapters illustrate how translocality, as a lived experience, is articulated, represented and mediated materially, while at the same time material objects may become agents that facilitate or constrain people's spatial movement and social mobility (Svašek 2012). From such a perspective, this volume scrutinizes a wide range of themes such as the impact of nation states, transnational Muslim movements, and new media technology on mobile trajectories and identity formations, formal or informal economic activities in a post-Socialist capitalist environment, and, finally, the reproduction of social inequality through bureaucratic regimes.

Simultaneously, understanding translocality as a social reality provides insights into how actors from Central Asia and the Caucasus engage in 'multiple modernities' and various processes of globalization. With its focus on the lived experiences 'on the ground', this volume follows Ferguson (2006:23), who argues that scholars should focus discussions about the global less 'on transnational flows and images of unfettered connection than on the social relations that selectively constitute global society' (see also Jackson 2013:193). This enables the provision of 'experience-near accounts [...] of the existential aspects of

migration' (Jackson 2013:194, Graw and Schielke 2013:16). At the same time, putting more emphasis on the 'everyday' allows us to follow the stratified, multi-scalar, and non-linear ways in which globalization is experienced in the regions under examination, which are somewhat obscured by the prominent notions of 'flows' or 'scapes'. Therefore, approaching translocality as an everyday experience also helps to capture the concise meanings and the particular situatedness of those political, economic, and other macro-dynamics, which have been framed as the globalization of Central Asia (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013). The authors of this volume do so by associating local change in Central Asia and the Caucasus with larger scale phenomena such as labour migration, cross-border trade, the globalization of scholarship, and the circulation of concepts such as 'modernity', 'development' and 'Islam'. Thus, our volume picks up what Africa historian Frederic Cooper has identified as the shortcomings of globalization theory: the limits of interconnection as well the specificity of the structures that are necessary to make spatial relationships work (Cooper 2001:189–90). When tracing how movements and connections that transgress conventional borders and boundaries link to individual agency *and* the institutionalization or consolidation of cultural, political, and social structures, we respond to Freitag and von Oppen's pledge to develop a historical perspective that goes far beyond the era of the nation state and thus may embrace both transnationalism, globalization, and historical entanglements.

### 'Alternative spatialisations' and new epistemological avenues

The different ways in which the authors in this volume employ translocality either as a research perspective or object of research itself opens up a wide range of epistemological avenues that may challenge received methodologies or ontological assumptions about the anthropology, history, and sociology of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In Chapter Four, Elena Kim uses translocality as a lens to capture how the livelihoods of poor female landowners in rural Uzbekistan are shaped by the country's involvement in the global cotton trade. Drawing from micro-level observations of everyday negotiations, the author illustrates how poor rural households are systematically excluded from a system



of community-based water management, which officially subscribes to international standards for improving social equality in Uzbekistan. For the institutional ethnographer, Kim argues, the translocality concept helps to unmask existing technologies of uneven power relations that inform institutional processes of water governance but remain mostly covert.

Svetlana Jacquesson argues that in modern historiography a translocality perspective ensures a better analytical grasp of non-elite actors who are involved in the production of a new, evidence-based ancient history of the Kyrgyz people. Tackling the intellectual endeavour of non-professional historians in Kyrgyzstan as a translocal field, Jacquesson's chapter (Chapter Six) shows that globalization can also be understood as the individual capacity to consider oneself as part of larger entities through being connected with other, previously separated places in the world and their respective histories. Thus, the author illustrates how Kyrgyz amateur historians voice their claims for agency in a world history that is still largely Eurocentric. Even more, such unexpected research outcomes may contradict the commonsensical expectations of what globalization should bring, as it invites a reflexive engagement with the researchers' sources, methods, and the ways in which academic knowledge is produced.

Obviously, a translocal perspective may help to reveal alternative spatialisations, which emerge from mobile actors' social relations and practices in and between very concrete places, and which transcend predominant academic notions of Central Asia and the Caucasus as fixed geographic or nation-/empire-bound territories. In that way, we aim to situate this volume in the field of new area studies, i.e., as a project that seeks to replace the container term 'area' with 'flexible definitions of spatial figurations, allowing for permeability and movement' without abandoning the notion of area entirely (Houben 2017:204). Similarly, van Schendel's work on *Geographies of Knowing and Ignorance* (2002:658) argues for a move away from 'trait' to 'process geography', which again opens up a new understanding of areas not as pre-given, 'static, timeless containers of historicity', but as socially constructed. In Central Asia Studies, several attempts have been made to match these claims. Canfield's (1992) idea of 'Greater Central Asia' as an extended, cross-border region or single zone, which covers the political, economic,

and cultural interconnections among the population of Central Asia, China's westernmost province Xinjiang and its neighbors Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, is in line with these thoughts, but still remains limited to the newly emerged geopolitical formations in the post-Cold-War era. In a more recent attempt, the inter-university Competence Network *Crossroads Asia*, which is based in Germany, has elaborated a new, promising understanding of 'area'. Accordingly, the concept of *Crossroads Asia* seeks to transcend geographic and geopolitical definitions and instead understands the region, which stretches from eastern Iran to the western parts of China and from northern Kazakhstan to the northern parts of India, as a 'multiply interconnected space'. This space emerges out of interactions, movements, and flows that cross and transcend spatial, social, and cultural boundaries (Crossroads Asia Working Group Migration 2012/2014: 1). The succeeding remarkable bulk of transdisciplinary works has initiated a wide range of new conceptual, theoretical, and epistemological perspectives that stress the importance of the local, intimate, contextual, and material forms of connectivity and the lived geographies these are entwined with (Alff and Benz 2014, Kreutzmann and Watanabe 2016). With an emphasis on the institutionalization and historical depth of cross-border relations, *Crossroads Asia's* argument for a dynamic and permeable socio-spatial and historical configuration of exchange and connectedness takes into account the complex ways in which mobility is related to people's identities, and to political and economic situations (Marsden 2011:1–2).

Following the contributions to this volume, we can identify a wide range of such complex socio-spatial configurations, which result from cross-border networks and the related circulations of people, things and ideas, and challenge, for example, the colonial narrative of territorial boundedness. Among these configurations, for example, is the spatial Muslim concept of *dar ul-Islam*; i.e., the idea of a Muslim territory that transcends the political borders of the Southern region of the early Soviet empire and Afghanistan, and that becomes the very concrete emplacement for the rather abstract notion of the supranational community of Muslim believers, the *umma*. Exploring how religious doctrines have triggered a well-defined cross-border movement out of the Soviet empire (*hijra*), and giving colonized Muslim subjects a voice to explain their migration trajectories, Kamoludin Abdullaev's

contribution to this volume presents a counter-narrative to Soviet and Western historiographies. Replacing the dominant lens of methodological Soviet nationalism with that of translocality, the author shows how colonial policies have turned cross-border mobilities of Central Asian Muslims into 'transnational migration' and thus constructed emigration from the Soviet territory as political action directed against a colonial regime. Using translocality as a descriptive tool, Abdullaev unmasks the common simplification of a complex phenomenon. Speaking implicitly to other chapters in this volume, his study helps to identify how old colonial resentments against the mobile tradition of Islam in the region continue in the negative evaluation and stigmatization of Muslim travellers in the political and public sphere in both postcolonial Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (see also Malikov and Stephan-Emmrich in Chapters Two and Nine of this volume).

Another example of how socio-spatial ties across national borders link historic and contemporary communal belonging is presented in regard to Dungan identity. Henryk Alff traces in Chapter Five how this ethnic group's positioning has been newly articulated in reference to the Eurasian land bridge between Central Asia and China, but how it is also based on the historical roots that this Chinese-speaking ethnic minority of Kazakhstan traces back to China. Examining how Dungan economic leaders successfully engage in local development through their translocal networks, Alff discusses alternative socio-spatial relations that may help to overcome established territorial notions (such as 'methodological nationalism'); binary conceptualizations of space (such as 'urban-rural' or 'centre-periphery'); and finally, perspectives that are restricted to the local 'boundedness' of resources and people.

Other authors in this volume show how spaces of cultural proximity evolve from the Soviet experience that Kyrgyz traders in Novosibirsk share with the Russian majority there (Schröder, Chapter Eight), or from the shared Persian culture that enables Tajik entrepreneurs in Dubai to integrate into established Sunni-Iranian and Afghan business networks in the Arab Emirates (Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich, Chapter Two). The spatial dimension of cultural proximity reminds us that encountering difference or engaging with realities of globalization in urban settings does not occur unfiltered but takes place in 'nested' contexts (see Kirmse 2011). These may consist of shared cultural or religious experiences, which allow the articulation of multiple belongings outside national

frameworks (Stephan-Emmrich, and Alff, Chapter Nine and Chapter Five, respectively). But such contexts can also refer to new claims of agency, such as when rewriting world history from the Kyrgyz vantage point draws on the 'nested' framework of postcolonial nationalism (Jacquesson, Chapter Six).

At the same time, alternative spatialisations are practiced in virtual relations associated with the way mobile actors use the internet, social media, and new media technologies. Thus, carving out translocality as an intermediary concept, some contributions in this volume address how virtual spaces facilitate the articulation of multiple belongings, the emotional attachment to particular places, or an elusive homing instinct towards an ancestral home place. Working towards a translocal ethnography, Schröder asks in his 'epistemographic' notes what, in fact, research on highly mobile economic actors such as his Kyrgyz interlocutors in China and Russia 'can know'. Reflecting on his own fluid positionality as a researcher in regard to the complex situatedness of his interlocutors in different localities in Eurasia, he identifies various social and other boundaries, called 'house-rules' of fieldwork, which shape the very contours of producing anthropological knowledge in highly mobile field sites. Like Stephan-Emmrich in Chapter Nine, he argues for a stronger turn in Central Asian and Caucasus Studies towards virtual lifeworlds, in order to explore how translocality can be the result of, and part of, reality, while moving in(-between) virtual fields of economic transaction, identity and cultural consumption, belonging and home (see Ibold 2010, Kirmse 2013).

Another form of alternative spatialization is addressed in Emil Nasritdinov's anthropological study of the spiritual transformation of middle-aged Kyrgyz men, who after the chaos of the post-independence era in the 1990s became followers of the global Muslim Tablighi Jamaat movement. Discussing *hijra* as a spiritual, inner journey without spatial movement, the author links the 'trans' in translocality to a person's individual transformation towards becoming 'a better person': someone who is embedded in a complex environment of flows, folds and obstacles of space, time and society, and thus eventually changes his own notion of a very physical place, i.e., in Nasritdinov's case study, an urban neighborhood in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital city, where his main interlocutors dwell. With this focus on what Setha Low (2009) has described as 'embodied spaces', Nasritdinov offers an interesting

alternative perspective on post-Soviet transition and urban change in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

## The complex realities of 'translocal livelihoods'

With our particular emphasis on how emotions, memories, and belongings produce alternative spatialisations, we have argued elsewhere for a broader understanding of livelihood as a concept that embraces both material (i.e., economic) and immaterial (i.e., social, cultural, and spiritual) concerns in order to understand how mobility and connectedness may be institutionalized (see Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014:5). With such a widened focus, eventually, translocality can be apprehended and portrayed in its full complexity. A broader notion of 'translocal livelihood', for example, allows for a more open and flexible approach towards 'mobile' people's social experience and thus scrutinizes narrower understandings of migration as simply an economic practice and a relocation to 'where the money is'. Tracing how 'place', or a certain idea of it, is constructed when people (and their multiple belongings) move through space and time, some authors in this volume detect the entwinement and overlap of different modes of mobility, revealing the multifaceted reality of Muslim travel as a social and moral action (see Eickelman and Piscatori 1990) that may simultaneously encompass knowledge travel, labour migration, emigration, and pilgrimage. In this way, Stephan-Emmrich locates the emotional geographies of Tajik migrants in Dubai in the religious imagination of their ambitious piety projects. The positive or negative evaluation of the places where the migrants dwell or have dwelt before as 'good' or 'bad Muslim places' is associated with emotions, and with aspirations for accumulating new religious or other capital. Thus, both the emotional geography and religious makeup of these mobile agents trigger new forms of movement such as migration for work, pilgrimage (*hajj*) or Muslim emigration (*hijra*). Stephan-Emmrich shows, similarly to Abdullaev in Chapter One, how piety can mobilize people to migrate and provide a resource to make spatial movement and geographic place and space meaningful at the same time (see also Conermann and Smolarz 2015, Silvey 2007).

While many other contributions in this volume point to the positive effects of spatial mobility, which eventually may lead to economic, spiritual, or social success, Susanne Fehlings in her study on female petty traders in Chapter Seven emphasizes its negative effects. The socio-economic crisis in post-Soviet Georgia has produced 'marginal mobilities' that do not facilitate stories of personal achievement but became markers for poverty and lack of access to resources. Unfolding a gendered perspective on translocality, she shows how mobility can become a poor woman's way of life, and as such is indicative of stasis rather than movement and development. Furthermore, her chapter illustrates that success in trade tends to limit the women's involvement in mobile livelihoods and instead leads to immobility as a choice. Moreover, the economic success of these petty traders can replace spatial movement with a 'virtual mobility', i.e. engagement in internet-based trade.

Most of the contributions, however, make clear that translocal livelihoods facilitate both positive and negative experiences of spatial movement. Translocality thus also serves as an analytical tool with which to trace how the dialectic process of mobility and emplacement produces a wider range of ambivalences and contradictions (see also Barak Kalir's Afterword).

Finally, for some authors in this volume, translocality serves as an analytical instrument for scrutinizing the limits of the core academic concepts they work with. Fehlings argues that the mobile practices of female petty traders in Tbilisi are never clearly 'formal' or 'informal'. Tackling the 'everyday' of those mobile women for whom crossing the Georgian border is a core economic strategy, the author clarifies that petty trade practices and places are simultaneously 'formal' and 'informal', and that transgressions of the 'formal' as defined by others, i.e., the state, are gradual. Moreover, in her chapter she points out that Georgian women's trading practices and their support networks can, if institutionalized, create new structures beyond national horizons that weaken the role of the nation state and its regulation regimes. This notwithstanding, Fehlings argues that national borders and institutions still are relevant and that the petty traders have to deal with them creatively.

## Ambivalent state borders

The complex social experience of translocal livelihoods becomes most obvious when the authors in this volume address the permeability or durability of social, economic, ethnic, religious, and political boundaries. Obviously, state borders and border regimes are of major concern. The state is extremely relevant to the understanding of both the dialectic process of movement and emplacement and the related spatial configurations and new identities in, beyond, and across Central Asia and the Caucasus. But we neither want to favour the practice of privileging state borders, nor do we attempt to use the nation state as a natural lens to study identity, ethnicity, or religion, as many studies on Central Asia and the Caucasus do. Our aim is thus to avoid the trap of what Kalir (2013:312) has termed a 'pervasive methodological nationalism', which would have meant approaching our research locations, interlocutors, and questions from 'stagnant paradigms' that we would have carried with us even when 'travelling with' the mobile subjects of our studies. Instead, we stress in this introduction that a translocal perspective may help us to look at political systems of mobility through the eyes of those directly involved in them. In other words, it may encourage us to consider how non-elite mobile actors perceive, assess, and experience the role of states, and cause us to scrutinize the contexts in which national belonging becomes an important matter. This accords with Reeves' recent argument for a spatial-relational approach to state borders, which puts emphasis on how the state, through situated practices of border work, is temporarily and contextually done, undone, invoked or ignored (2014:12–13). Tracing how borders in the Kyrgyzstani part of the Ferghana Valley appear, disappear, and materialize at certain times, Reeves unmasks academic representations of the state as a static, empty container or elusive agent. The author thus takes the approach of other recent anthropological studies that consider 'the state' as constructed by discourses and everyday practices in unruly and contradictory ways (Sökefeld 2016). Moreover, she scrutinizes the impact of the colonial or post-colonial state on mobility and spatial relations in its full complexity as dynamic and relational. Accordingly, some contributions to this volume reveal a striking ambivalence in the effects of Soviet or

post-Soviet border policies in Central Asia and the Caucasus. On the one hand, state actors and policies continue to have a strong impact in regulating and hampering cross-border mobility. On the other hand, these policies trigger mobility, and they are involved in shaping mobile experiences and new identities outside state-led definitions to a striking extent. In early Soviet Central Asia, colonial border policies created obvious interruptions in the everyday mobility of people in the region. But simultaneously, as Abdullaev illustrates in Chapter One, they have triggered new forms of movement such as Muslim emigration (*hijra*). Moreover, looking through the lens of translocality, the author shows that spatial movement was only one response to Russian colonialization. In contrast, the emerging Basmachi movement mobilized religion-based resistance among those Muslims who stayed in the Soviet empire's territory. Accordingly, the Russian colonialization of Central Asia is presented by Abdullaev as a project that triggered diverse cross-border movements (Dagyeli 2014, Abdullaev 2009).

Alff develops a similar argument in Chapter Five. But he suggests that the Soviet Union's breakdown has created an ambivalent context for both the mobility and immobility of borderland communities such as the Dungans, whose settlements criss-cross the Kazakh-Chinese border. Kazakhstan's post-Socialist nationalism accelerated the reconsolidation of the then-permeable national border in the early years after independence. The resulting disconnectedness and limited mobility of Dungans and other Central Asians in the region fulfilled a core undertaking of Soviet political control and consequently hampered cross-border trade with neighboring Central Asian countries (see also Kosmarski 2011). Simultaneously, the relaxation of travel and foreign trade regulations opened up new avenues of mobility for Dungans in Kazakhstan, in particular to China. Dungans recognized this early on and became pioneers of an innovative cross-border business that in the meantime has facilitated the exchange of construction technology and agricultural innovation with China, as well as innovations in ethnic tourism and international education, thereby paving the way for the further entangling of cultural-economic ties between these two countries.



The virtual articulation of belonging that is addressed in certain contributions to this volume can be identified as a highly ambivalent practice as well. Often, the internet serves as a new translocal identity space, which may help to overcome state restrictions (Ibold 2010, McGlinchey and Johnson 2007). However, Philipp Schröder clarifies in Chapter Eight that the ethno-national orientation of the younger generation of Kyrgyz in Novosibirsk is expressed through a virtual homing instinct, which connects youth to an ancestral homeland and thus essentializes features such as shame to be ‘typically Kyrgyz’ while interlocutors are far from their ancestral homeland.

The ambivalence of nation-state projects in the post-Soviet area and beyond reveals that state borders and other boundaries may be temporary as well as permeable. This elucidates how the transgression and penetration of state territory, or of other social or cultural spaces, happens according to different degrees. It is essential to scrutinize how, when and why state borders and boundaries matter to our interlocutors’ mobile and spatial experiences, and scaling turns out to be a helpful methodological instrument in order to make visible the various existing boundaries within the flows, circulations, and cross-border movements of people, things, and ideas. This allows for a restructuring and rescaling of spatial arrangements to further an understanding, for example, of how local transformations speak to global processes. Translocality as a research perspective underlines that our global world is not borderless, but that territories, pathways, and places still matter since they are both constituted by, and result from, very concrete social processes. Following anthropologist and geographer Neil Smith (2010:31), scaling provides ‘a metric for drawing social, political and economic boundaries in the landscape’ (cited in Houben 2017:199–200). This becomes strikingly obvious in Elena Kim’s analysis of the powerful technologies of state bureaucracy, which materialize in the need to possess a stamp in order to be granted access to regulation patterns of water flowing through the plough land of dispossessed rural Uzbek households.

Scrutinizing how state regimes may mobilize or restrict people’s movement and mobility, a translocality approach may also help to illuminate how the state itself is embedded in, and formed by global assemblages, or how globalization occurs *through* the state (Heathershaw 2011:148, Adams 2010).

## Transtemporalities

As result of the mobilities paradigm and the spatial turn, an increasing body of literature in the humanities deals with aspects of mobility and cross-border connectivity. In this way, the humanities have shifted from producing modernist narratives of linearity and history to investigating how the complex realities of social relations and practices in a globalized world are related to space and spatial figurations. Many of this volume's contributions, while addressing the negotiations of socio-spatial practices between and within places as they are subject to the agency of certain actors' strategies and choices, demonstrate that peoples' lives are highly relational and contextual in regard to their situatedness in both space *and* time. While the concept of translocality is overwhelmingly used to depict processes of circulation or transfer as well as spatial configurations across borders, time is often neglected as a crucial category for observation. Many of the contributions in this volume instead illustrate in various ways how time matters. More precisely, they show how the translocal spaces, identities and transformations of the people and places under study are embedded in distinct time-to-time relations and temporalities. Accordingly, this volume argues for an understanding of time as an integral part of translocality. For example, the sacred genealogies preserved by *khoja* families during the Soviet era (Malikov, Chapter Three), or the photographs that Muslim travellers store in their smartphones (Stephan-Emmrich, Chapter Nine), freeze time and fixate 'transtemporalities', i.e., movements that cross and connect times on different, yet 'jumping scales'. Insofar as the translocal realities of the mobile and immobile actors described in the contributions to this volume cut across mythical or ancient times, the period of Soviet colonialism, and the post-Soviet transformation period, they also embrace subjective times of memory, dream, and illusion. The nationalist attitude of new Kyrgyz historians, as discussed by Jacquesson (Chapter Six), relies heavily on a 'transtemporal' imagination that stretches from the very local to the very global arena. This imagination implies the capacity to relate to abstract ancestors far distant in time, of whom no or few material traces remain. This includes multi-scalar references to ancient empires, historical events, and places in Europe, America, and China. Therefore, by claiming that Kyrgyz warriors

reached as far as Europe and have left their imprint there, such as in the architectural symbolism of Berlin's Brandenburger Tor, these non-elite knowledge brokers make sense of Kyrgyz identity in world history and advocate for their nation's core role in shaping it.

Other chapters in the volume, by contrast, approach transtemporality through memory and a nostalgic attachment to geographic sites, and examine them as constitutive markers of translocal connectivity and multiple belongings. The memories, as well as possible future lives associated with 'far off, ideal Muslim places', which the Tajik student migrants in Stephan-Emmrich's chapter imagine or dream of, constitute a major resource for articulating emotional geographies that span places of previous residence in Tajikistan and the Middle East, across political, social, and cultural boundaries. Stephan-Emmrich reveals that the conditions of the post-Socialist transformation in Tajikistan produce very individual temporal narratives of progress and development. This is in line with Jackson's observation that everyday lives 'do not unfold in straight lines and that there are many temporalities in history and subject times such as the reverie of dream, memory or crisis' (Jackson 2013:198). These subject times are often obscured by cause-and-effect models of linearity and history, but they can, as we argue here, be rediscovered through the lens of a translocality-cum-transtemporality approach.

While the Tajik student travellers through their nostalgic renderings of the past preserve a sense of locality and thus articulate their desire for 'belonging somewhere else', young members of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Novosibirsk base their transtemporal imagination on notions of an ancestral 'homeland' (Schröder, Chapter Eight). Representing a 'home away from home' (Smith 2011:195), the internet serves these youths as a virtual vehicle to mobilize an elusive 'homing desire' (Brah 1996) towards an ethno-national territory rarely visited in person. Schröder's contribution thus shows that such a form of nostalgic attachment is not merely an expression of regret for the passing of a joyful or glorious past. In contrast, he locates the agency of the second generation of young Kyrgyz in Novosibirsk in making sense of their families' mobile (trader) biographies. Kyrgyz youth in Novosibirsk thus translate the nostalgia of their parents' generation into new translocal identities, which embrace both a rather essentialized notion of 'Kyrgyzness' and a claim to belong to Russia.

Such a patriotic commitment is quite in line with the 'globalizing ethno-nationalism' of Jacquessons's Kyrgyz amateur historians. Connecting Kyrgyz history with places and people outside Kyrgyzstan, the writings of these alternative historians can be seen as the result of an intellectual practice of 'placemaking in the world', which feeds a nostalgia that enables the readership to connect to their ancestors and claim the Kyrgyz people's participation in ancient civilizations and powerful past empires.

Following another reading of 'transtemporality', some chapters in this volume demonstrate that translocality and its related transformations are possible without spatial movement at all, but with movement through time. Emil Nasritdinov, in Chapter Ten, traces the biography of a place. Providing an ethnography of the actual transformations of an urban neighborhood's spatial properties and its associated meanings, Nasritdinov, by adopting Deleuze's concept of the fold, argues for a new approach towards socio-spatial relations that enables the depiction of the ongoing, complex, and multi-directional becoming of a post-Soviet urban place through different time periods. He therefore shows that locality is not only a spatial but also temporal category (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:10). The religious transformation of members of the *Botanika* neighborhood in Bishkek reflects very local politics of 'placemaking'. These local politics materialize through the construction of a mosque, which becomes the social and religious centre of the newly established local branch of the global Tablighi Jamaat community. This religious appropriation of urban spaces transforms the identity of a particular place from a Soviet youth and post-Soviet adult space into a new, translocal space of religious belonging that serves the spiritual demands of the now grown-up residents, and also allows for individual readings of modernity, progress, and development. However, and going beyond Nasritdinov's ethnographic case study, the new religious identity of some *Botanika* residents may at the same time create a sense of local displacement among those who remained in the neighborhood after its transformation (Smith 2011:195), but did not become pious members of that novel mosque community.

Both Stephan-Emmrich's and Nasritdinov's contributions can be read as two different examples of a spatial biography, which evidences how the transformation of place, or at least the transforming notion of a place and its spatial properties, can coincide with the personal

transformation of residents through time; i.e., during an individual life-course. Tracing the religious becoming of both mobile Tajik students and a single urban neighborhood in Kyrgyzstan's capital through 'spatial narratives', both chapters also unfold how the personal memories of both the ethnographer and his or her research partners are embedded in and bonded to place (Casey 1987). Simultaneously, such spatial narratives are comprehensible as both border-transgressing and border-generating spaces of Muslim encounter, experience, and identification.

Besides biography, a transgenerational perspective might help to trace the transformation of a particular place through time. Comparing the relatively short-term development of the Tajik Dubai business since the early 2000s with that of a Kyrgyz (traders') diaspora in Novosibirsk, which was established in the early 1990s and covers a number of trading generations (Schröder, Chapter Eight), a transtemporal approach may clarify that transformations of people and places happen at different speeds and with different scales of volatility or sustainability. While well-established Kyrgyz trader networks led to the institutionalization of cross-border mobility between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, and finally the establishment of a 'vibrant' ethnic community abroad, the more recent history of the Tajik Dubai business has not yet established a similarly sustainable socio-cultural environment away from home. In contrast, precarious working conditions in Dubai have increased with the new generation of migrant workers, stimulating the search for new destinations.

## Translocality and translation

Mobility across space and time induces various forms and processes of translation. Dealing with a wide range of boundaries (political, linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic), some of the translocal actors examined in this volume take the roles of translators who quite literally 'carry across' embodied and materialized meanings, values, skills, and ideas from one context into another. In these ways, they introduce 'newness' into the localities to which they come to dwell while usually staying connected to their 'original homes'. Drawing on the etymological meaning of the Latin term translation as 'movement', 'disruption', or 'displacement', the term is used here to capture the cultural practices of transfer that

occur in the various translocal contexts explored in this volume. We thereby follow an anthropological reading of translation as a process of transporting specific understandings of reality across boundaries of time, place, and culture (Tambiah 1985). So far, this reading is in line with how translation is depicted in area studies, i.e. as a process that involves practices of ‘shifting into a different system of meaning’ (Houben 2017:206). Translation in these terms becomes apparent for example in the writings of Kyrgyz amateur historians that transgress a wide range of boundaries: linguistically through the translation of core texts into or from English, as well as metaphorically in the sense that a non-academic work is based on scholarly methods of handling sources to produce alternative readings of a ‘global ethnogenesis’ of the Kyrgyz nation. Thus, Kyrgyz historians transfer and translate different knowledge repertoires from one context into another, i.e., from academic to lay readership, and from Western to (post-)Soviet epistemologies.

According to the chapters by Abdullaev, Schröder, Mirzoev, and Stephan-Emmrich, which address experiences of labour migration and forced mobility within and beyond places and regions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, processes of translation are best understood as the repositioning of ‘a foreign interpretative horizon into a new locale’ that causes various interactions resulting from encounters between different interpretative horizons (Conway 2012:270). This observation agrees with that of Longinovic (2002:6–7), that mobile people come to understand their identities through their displacement and the experience of being different. Mobile experiences therefore open up a horizon for a new performance of cultural or other identities, while translation can make a journey or a mobile livelihood project seem meaningful and stimulate processes of reworking national, religious, and other identities (Schlehe and Lücking 2016). At the same time, agents who translate can operate outside of prevailing cultural and political logic, as Homi Bhabha (1994) has suggested with his concept of a *third space*. Such a reading, for example, invites consideration of the material, and in particular visual, displays of a flexible and new Muslim identity among Tajiks in Dubai as a means of political intervention that interrupts hegemonic narratives of national identity (Buden and Novotny 2009). Also, Tajiks’ heightened mobility within competing religious traditions can be understood as a challenge to the narrow state-led official version of a homegrown

and national Tajik Islam, which excludes and stigmatizes the new Muslim piety of student travellers as 'foreign', 'imported' and therefore 'dangerous' (Stephan 2006).

With an emphasis on the agency of translocal actors who rework identities and belongings, the practice of translation also involves the individual's capacity to deal with change, difference, strangeness, and the ambivalent experience of coping with the prevalent distinctions between 'here' and 'there'. This can simultaneously produce openings and closures, possibilities and constraints, joys and sorrows, as some of the chapters in this volume show. However, cultural translations are above all a prerequisite for successful translocal livelihoods. As some chapters reveal, migrants transfer knowledge, ideas, language skills, and forms of multiple belonging into various translocal economic strategies, which are elsewhere described as integral aspects of a migrant's 'transnational habitus' (Kelly and Lusi 2006). Schröder in Chapter Eight, for example, illustrates how border transgressions happen via internet-based business practices in China. According to Azamat, an interlocutor of Schroeder, Mandarin language skills and knowledge of local search engines are key resources for the first generation of Kyrgyz businessmen to navigate China's state-censored virtual landscapes. By definition, in his profession as a middleman who facilitates business-deals between Chinese manufacturers and his various Russian-speaking clients from Central Asia, the Caucasus or Russia, Azamat's primary task and skill is translating. This translation work, if successful, bridges multiple gaps between borders, languages, and forms of knowledge.

The role of language as a crucial resource for translation is also stressed in Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich's study on the Tajik Dubai business. By way of their 'polyglotism', Tajiks in Dubai are able to attach themselves to multiple business networks and translate their cultural, symbolic, and spatial capital into different economic contexts. In their capacities as middlemen they engage with other Muslims across cultural differences (Arabs, Iranians, Afghans), different business sectors (trade, tourism), and different markets at 'home' and among their counterparts in the Middle East and Eurasia.

Translation abilities also form a crucial part of the Dungans' cross-border group identity. According to Alff in Chapter Five, Dungans in Kazakhstan position themselves as intermediaries between Kazakhstan

and China as part of the transfer of models of economic development, and they thus make sense of their cross-border group existence in between these two countries. The Dungans' particular socio-spatial situatedness as middlemen entails their translating knowledge, skills, and ideas of social change. At the same time, their role as brokers informs and is produced by the Dungan sense of multiple belonging and cultural embeddedness in both the Chinese and Kazakh contexts. Ultimately, the mediating role of Dungans is articulated in their self-representations, which are performed in relation to state-led official discourses, which both in China and Kazakhstan have been focusing on building a 'modern Silk Road' or 'Eurasian land bridge'.

Processes of translation are also closely entwined with practices of placemaking. Carrying across language skills, cultural knowledge, religious values and patterns of identification, the Tajiks and Uzbeks who were forced by the Soviet colonizers to leave their places of origin have appropriated distant places in neighboring Afghanistan (Abdullaev, Chapter One). Appropriating these destinations as their new home, Muslim migrants from Central Asia became agents of change, while at the same time they underwent change themselves when they became Afghan citizens.

With a focus, for example, on the introduction of new agricultural technologies to the Tajiks' and Uzbeks' places of resettlement in Afghanistan, on the successful transcultural business of Tajik migrant workers in Dubai, or on young and dynamic Kyrgyz entrepreneurs in China, particular chapters of this volume emphasize the positive outcomes of translocal mobility. Translation thus may turn out to be the capability to cope with uncertainty, difference, and diversity in places far away from home. Accordingly, migration opens up opportunities to accumulate and transform different forms of capital and thus translate skills, meanings, values, and other mobile properties into economic, spiritual, or social progress. In this regard, the digital conversations that Stephan-Emmrich (Chapter Nine) had with Tajik student travellers in the Arab Emirates illustrate how her research partners mediate their spiritual progress (a heightened mobility across divergent Islamic traditions) through the publicly performed usage of smartphone apps and digital photo albums, i.e., through prestigious consumer goods that simultaneously demonstrate the economic success of their translocal



livelihoods. Obviously, the benefit of the translation concept for the volume is that it serves as a suitable prism to enable us to bring into focus the agency of people who act or think translocally and discuss how these people find room to manoeuvre and address those issues they consider most salient (Kathiravelu 2016:97).

However, the mobile agents examined here are also constrained in their ability to transfer knowledge, ideas and meanings from one context into another. Depending on a variety of social, political, and historical circumstances, they thus 'operate within a bounded horizon of possible choices' (Conway 2012:277, see also Vertovec 2010:9). Relying on a 'shared Sunni-Persian tradition', the careers of male Tajiks in Dubai depend upon good relations with Afghan traders and businessmen from Baluchistan. Whilst this facilitates translocal spaces of cultural and religious proximity within which the Tajiks of Dubai easily move and pursue their economic projects, access to Emirati citizens, Arab residents, and members of the long-established Iranian diaspora in Dubai seems almost impossible. Consequently, their business networks create an 'institutional coziness' (Finke 2014) that enables and filters but also limits the ways in which Tajiks in Dubai experience what they describe as belonging to the 'global' *umma*. But can border-transgressing movements occur without translation? Following the spatial movements of petty traders and various border regions in Georgia, Susanne Fehlings (Chapter Seven) points out that although the women's precarious mobile livelihoods are embedded in multi-scalar and spatial connectivities and flows between the Caucasus region and places in Turkey, Russia, and China, their translocal experiences are nevertheless limited to specific, and often small-scale, spaces of interaction. Being confined to the realms of household or local market might not, then, foster economic success and may prove detrimental for individual social mobility. The marginal mobility of her research partners therefore does not entail processes and practices of significant cross-context translation and in consequence does not facilitate the emergence of new translocal identities.

Even more, Elena Kim's chapter (Chapter Four) impressively shows what may happen when translation processes fail or become interrupted by powerful state interventions. Tracing the everyday governance of water resources in rural Uzbekistan through water union associations (WUA), her contribution depicts how well-intended local managerial

work, which aims at implementing the global and efficient technologies of corporate capitalism, ultimately becomes counterproductive and instead entrenches social injustice and produces highly precarious rural livelihoods that depend on the labour migration of male family members. Receiving a stamp to signal legal WUA membership turns into an unachievable prerequisite for many poor farmers as the state limits far-reaching access to scarce water resources in order to pursue its own monoculture cotton-cultivation projects. A legacy from the Soviet era, cotton cultivation is among the few ways the Uzbek state can gain a foothold in the global economy. Translation, therefore, turns out to be the process of 'localizing' globalized ideas of equality, democracy, and development into the specific framework of Uzbekistan's agrarian sector. Using translocality as an analytical lens, Kim uncovers the state's weakness or unwillingness to mediate between institutionalized forms of equality and development management 'from outside' and the internal needs of farmers. Although the latter were the intended beneficiaries of the water management programs, the farmers are hampered by bureaucratic obstacles to participation in the state-led project of cotton cultivation.

Finally, this introduction and the contributions assembled in this volume allow us to understand translation as an observable practice through which mobile and immobile actors can deal with the permeability of state borders and other boundaries; they can negotiate the uncertainties, limitations, and opportunities of their 'translocal livelihoods', which are structured by various mobility regimes, and they can connect and give meaning to different places through time and space as part of emergent 'alternative spatialisations' or 'transtemporalities' beyond conventional academic and other containers. The examination of the processes of cultural translation thus may help us to break down abstract concepts, such as translocality itself, into observable patterns and contextualize these empirically within specific local-to-local relations (see Ferguson 2011). Accordingly, and as the following contributions will exemplify, translocality is a condition as much as a process, which simultaneously gives shape to and is shaped by the lived experiences of migrants, refugees, mobile traders, Muslim travellers, and amateur historians. At the same time, the complex ways mobility, movement, connectedness, and transfer are negotiated by people from Central Asia

and the Caucasus requires us to consider both the opportunities and restraints that promote or hamper cultural translations. This reveals the relational character of translocality and should allow us to avoid ‘the teleological trap’ of ‘using the concept as a normative category’ (Bromber 2013:65) that emphasizes either the positive outcomes *or* the political and other constraints of migration, cross-border trade, global scholarship, and student travel.

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